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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001752

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

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TAGS: [IS](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: MARONITE PATRIARCH CONCERNED ABOUT SUNNI
INTENTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Maronite Patriarch Sfeir expressed unease with reports that Lebanon's Sunni-dominated Internal Security Force (ISF) could become a Sunni "gendarmerie" outside the control of the state. He said he fully supports proposals to increase the capabilities of the more broadly representative Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), but wondered why the ISF appeared to be building parallel security structures. Regarding the just-released draft electoral law, the Maronite leader said he appreciates the bipartisan effort, but expressed concern that the size of the proposed electoral districts would result in some Christian candidates owing their success to non-Christian constituencies. He acknowledged, however, that the draft legislation was clearly superior to the Syrian-influenced year 2000 law and promised to advise Christian political leaders to engage in the upcoming Cabinet and parliamentary debates. Without mentioning his sources, Patriarch Sfeir said he is convinced that last Sunday's hostilities along the Blue Line were instigated by Syria, and that Hizballah was responsible for the relatively long-range rocket attack into Israel. Finally, he described the late night street demonstrations by Hizballah on June 1 as "spontaneous," and proved once again that Hizballah was incapable of accepting even the slightest criticism. End summary.

2. (C) Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir received the Ambassador and poloff on June 2 at his offices in Bkirki, north of Beirut. Sfeir had just returned from a trip to France where he had met with Saad Hariri, who had told the cleric he was "satisfied" with using the qada (small electoral districts) and would not oppose having the qadas used as in a new election law.

CONCERN OVER A POSSIBLE SUNNI GENDARMERIE

3. (C) While discussing the current status of the March 14 coalition, Sfeir asked the Ambassador about emerging discussions regarding assistance to the LAF and ISF. While the Maronite leader endorsed increasing the capabilities of the LAF -- particularly as a credible counter-force and eventual replacement for Hizballah's militia -- he expressed concern over reports that ISF was also seeking to improve its intelligence and operational capabilities. (Note: LAF G-2 commander, General George Khoury, among others, is thought to be providing Sfeir with this analysis. End note.)

¶4. (C) The Ambassador explained that both LAF and ISF would benefit from capability upgrades and both organizations were needed to improve the security situation in Lebanon. Sfeir acknowledged the validity of that argument, but once again expressed concern over the perceived Sunni influence in the ISF and whether the Sunni leadership (i.e., Saad Hariri) had a hidden agenda. Sfeir was pleased that both Defense Minister Elias Murr and Interior Minister Fatfat were scheduled to travel to Washington in the coming weeks to discuss assistance issues. The Ambassador and the Patriarch agreed that there needed to be improved coordination between the LAF and ISF.

LEBANON'S DRAFT ELECTORAL LAW

¶5. (C) The Patriarch revealed lukewarm support for the just-released draft electoral law, which mixes the qada districting discussed by Hariri and the Patriarch and the larger muhafaza districting. His concern essentially centered on whether future Christian parliamentarians would owe their electoral victories to non-Christian constituencies. Sfeir understood that due to Lebanon's complex confessional system, a "perfect" electoral law (in the eyes of the Christian community) was impossible, and he assured the Ambassador that he would advise Christian political leaders to approach the upcoming debate with open minds and a spirit of compromise.

¶6. (C) Sfeir said he also understood the significant improvement of the draft law over the old electoral law adopted in the year 2000, and the probability that, if the draft law were criticized to the point of its likely rejection, there would not be a another chance any time soon to improve the flawed electoral system.

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¶7. (C) The Patriarch concurred with the preliminary analysis that under the new law the Christian community (whose members constantly express anxiety over their diminishing political clout) could expect to elect most of its allocated delegates from qada districting where their confession predominated. In the Christian community's view, this would result in "genuine" Christian members of Parliament, i.e., delegates who would not owe their political allegiance to non-Christian political leaders. Sfeir felt this was an important improvement, and expressed hope that the qada principle would survive debate in the Cabinet and Parliament.

¶8. (C) But the Patriarch was uneasy with the draft law's proposal to elect members from the larger size "muhafaza" districts, particularly in the Beirut and Mount Lebanon regions. He said this arrangement would probably dilute existing Christian influence in important areas.

¶9. (C) Nevertheless, Sfeir reiterated his underlying support for electoral reform. He remarked that if it were fairly implemented, it would change parliamentary behavior for the better and result in an acceptable balance of political power between Lebanon's competing communities, all of whom are leery of one group achieving a dominant position.

MAY 28 BLUE LINE HOSTILITIES

¶10. (C) Sfeir said he was certain that the Syrians had a hand in last week's combat along the Blue Line. Without citing his sources, the Patriarch also stated his belief that Hizballah was responsible for the early morning rocket launchings that initiated the exchanges. Sfeir maintained that Syria's leadership continues to adhere to its plan to destabilize Lebanon and can be expected to encourage similar events in the future. He is convinced the Syrian regime will continue to try to convince the Lebanese people that Syrian

involvement in Lebanon is necessary for stability.

¶11. (C) Sfeir concurred that as long as Hizballah maintains the ability and freedom of action to initiate hostilities with Israel, the situation in the South will remain fragile and unstable.

HIZBALLAH'S THIN SKIN

¶12. (C) Concerning the short-notice demonstration of several thousand Hizballah supporters in Beirut late on the evening of June 1 (in response to a satirical depiction of Hassan Nasrallah on LBC), Sfeir said neither Nasrallah nor his supporters are capable of accepting even the slightest degree of criticism. Sfeir conveyed strong disapproval of their political immaturity and wondered how such a highly-strung leader could dispassionately participate in the political process.

A U.S. VISIT, BUT NOT TO WASHINGTON

¶13. (U) In closing, Patriarch Sfeir remarked that he was looking forward to a mid-July visit to Maronite communities in New York, Boston, Chicago and California. At this time, he does not plan to visit Washington.
FELTMAN